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ABSTRACT

The community at large can make a definite contribution in helping children develop the desire to read. First, community groups can make books available to children through such methods as sponsoring book fairs and donating the proceeds to school libraries for the purchase of books. Other methods of making books available to children, used in the United States and other countries, include having children contribute their old books to school libraries, establishing book banks for the exchange of children's books, and giving old school library books to children. Bookstores may encourage children to browse among children's books or may establish a lending library, as a South American department store has done. A United States factory provides new children's books for employees to borrow, and other businesses sometimes have children's book collections. In addition to making books available to children, community members can read to children by volunteering to work with children in schools. Relationships with school volunteers are meaningful to children and can help them develop the desire to read. (GW)

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COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPING READERS

for presentation at meeting on "Beyond Beginning Reading," at Sixth World Congress of Reading in Singapore, August 18, 1976

During the decade of the sixties, the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement, through its twenty-two national research centers scattered around the world, made studies of achievement. In writing, in May 1974, on the implications of these studies Benjamin S. Bloom stated:

> Learning in the schools is, now and for the foreseeable future, likely to be based on verbal instruction to groups using textbooks and other instructional materials which are largely verbal in nature. . . . The early development of verbal ability (vocabulary and reading comprehension) appears to be necessary if the child is to learn well -- or even to survive -- in school. (2)

It is not surprising, therefore, that a goal in many countries of the modern world is that all children learn to read. This is especially true in those countries where education is compulsory. Traditionally the school has been charged with efforts to attain this goal. More recently has come awareness that the acquisition and maintenance

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of adequate reading skills is a three-pronged endeavor, that of the schools, the parents and the community-at-large.

There has also come awareness that it is not enough merely to acquire reading skills; they must also be used. Reading skills are of little use, and may actually deteriorate if they are not used. Yet there are many children who learn to read but who never learn to like reading. Thus they never open a book unless compelled to do so, even as they get older.

It is in developing the desire to read and the habit of reading that the community-at-large can make a definite contribution. There are at least two major ways in which the community can become involved. One of these is in making lots of books available to children for children need to have an abundance of books. Children, as we well know, are different and have different interests in reading. One child may wish books about animals, while another is interested in biography and a third in cars. If there is something in which they are interested children read, otherwise they often do not. One child in Lehigh University's Centennial School for children told me one day, "Every lion and cat book I see I read." When asked how many, the reply was "About nine." On the other hand an eight-year-old girl in Sierra school, a little rural school in the district of Aibonito, high up in the mountains of Puerto Rico, spoke enthusiastically of the book she had just read about a cat, but she went on to tell me that she was not going to read anything more "because there are no more books about cats." Children also need books that they <u>can</u> read. Another child at Lehigh University's Centennial School referred to his teacher saying, "she helped

me in finding things to read. I usually don't get many things to read." Larrick notes that:

> When each child reads on a comfortable level, about a subject dear to his heart, reading becomes a pleasure instead of a punishment. But this can only happen when there are many attractive books from which to choose. (9)

However, far too many children do not have the opportunity to choose among attractive books and thus may be discouraged from becomming readers. Community groups can help to make books available to children in a number of different ways. They may make special funds available for the purchase of more books for the school library than are provided by the school budget. This was done by a group for the Indiera Fria rural school in the district of Maricao in Puerto Rico.

Such funds may be raised in various ways. In the city of Bethlehem, where I live, the American Association of University Women each spring holds a book fair in which used books, collected from persons in the community who no longer need them, are sold at reduced prices. Besides making books available to some who might not otherwise be able to have the joy of owning books, the fair each year also results in proceeds of hundreds of dollars that are used for college scholarships for young girls of the community. In other communities funds raised by such a fair might be used for providing books for libraries for children in schools and/or other places in the community.

In some semi-rural areas of Pennsylvania that I have visited, where there are no local bookstores, local community groups sponsor a new book fair. At some suitable time in the fall of the year representatives of various book companies bring children's books to the school and set up an exhibit. At this time children may purchase books with money

that they have saved for the purpose. Parents may also visit the exhibit and order books that they will use for Christmas gifts. Two things are accomplished by this endeavor: one, books become accessible to the community, both children and adults, and secondly, there may be a small commission for the local organizers of the fair which can be used for books for the school library.

Some communities, lacking funds to purchase many books, find other ways to make books available to children. While on sabbatical leave in 1974, I visited children's libraries in several South American countries. In a school in Cordoba, Argentina I found classroom libraries consisting of books that belonged to the children. At the beginning of the year a parent of each child selected one or two books from those at home to send to school. All children in the class were able to read the books at school during the week and borrow one book to take home to read over the weekend. Thus the children had an opportunity to read far more than the one or two books they had contributed to the classroom library. At mid-year all books were returned to the home from which they had been brought and other books were brought for the second half of the year.

Another interesting way of meeting the need for books is that which was used in starting El Banco del Libro, that is, the Book Bank, in Caracas, Venezuela. In 1960 Sra. Virginia de Betancourt, who had studied in Boston and had graduated from the University of Puerto Rico, returned to her country and voluntarily undertook to bring together a group of women who set about collecting books from the community. Using these books as a nucleus they initiated a system whereby a child could bring a book he owned and exchange it for one of those they had

collected. When the child finished reading the book he had received he might exchange it for still another one. This program of book exchange is probably that for which El Banco del Libro is best known, although it is now a foundation supporting a number of other activities, one of these being the establishment of a children's library in the Aristides Rojas Park in Caracas. Another activity of the Foundation is that of an extensive system of book mobiles that take books to schools and other centers throughout the city of Caracas.

A somewhat similar project was undertaken a few years ago in the Bronx in New York at P. S. 150 (6). At first some staff members had been passing on some of their own children's books to the pupils of that school. As the faculty gradually recognized the eager way in which the children received the books the idea for the project was born. For some of these disadvantaged children it was the very first book to be called "my own." The idea conceived was to give some of the old books from the school library to pupils who asked for them in writing, which in turn encouraged functional writing. Once a week about a dozen books were "advertised" over the public address system of the school. These books were to be distributed to the writers of the best letters of request. The response was great and so much interest was aroused in the project that many community friends as well as publishers began to donate books for distribution. Thousands of letters were written and more than five hundred books were distributed during the year. My only concern is that some children who wrote letters may not have received books even though they requested them. The project did demonstrate that children do appreciate the opportunity to have books of their own.

More recently the New Haven, Conn. PTA Council, together with the city public school system, undertook a Book Bank program. Books were solicited through articles placed in the local newspaper. The books received were sorted by parents and deposited in the Book Bank that had been established. Children could then withdraw books and read them. They were allowed to keep the books after reading them. (4)

Book stores may also help in fostering interest in reading. Although many stores simply have some tables where children's books are displayed there are other stores where an entire section is set aside for children's books, with children being made to feel welcome if they care to come in to browse. I have found some such stores in several countries. I often think of the young lad, probably about nine years of age, who was the only other occupant of the children's room at the University Bookstore in Oslo, Norway one afternoon when I was there. The lad took one book after another from the shelves until he found one that apparently pleased him, which he continued reading until his mother returned some time later and purchased the book. Children do enjoy choosing the books they read. Larrick has noted that "when children are free to choose the books they are interested in, they show remarkable skill in finding what they can read." (10)

Another bookstore where it is easy to browse among children's books is the big Campos bookstore in old San Juan, Puerto Rico. There an entire floor is devoted to children's books in both Spanish and English. At the Palacio del libro (Book Palace) in Montevideo, Uruguay a large room connecting with the main room is devoted to children's books. Especially interesting is the bookstore of Sr. Salomon Literat in the city of Corrientes in Argentina where books are arranged on low

bookshelves which children can easily reach. They can sit on the carpeted floor as long as they wish, reading books they take from the shelves. (5)

Other kinds of stores or places of business can help in getting books and readers together. In the large department store of Harrods on Calle Florida in the heart of the shopping district of Buenos Aires there is a lending library which was founded nearly a half century ago under the name "Lending Library", with a predominance of English and French books over those in Spanish since the services were more used by those residents who had come from European countries and were accustomed to using libraries. Through the intervening years the Spanish-speaking clients have increased and the services of the library have expanded. The library, which today is known as the "Biblioteca Circulante" and which contains some 150,000 volumes divided into three groups according to the language used, is designed to serve the general public, not only of the city of Buenos Aires, but also of the interior of the country. For the latter group books are sent in packages by mail and returned the same way. By paying an initial membership fee of one dollar (U.S.) and a monthly quota of less than three dollars one can borrow three books at a time and keep them for fifteen days. If one were capable of reading three books a day one could have 60 books a month for less than it would cost to buy one paperback novel. The library has a large collection of children's books in Spanish and English. For the children of members the monthly fee is only half of the regular fee although other children pay the same as adult members. (8)

In this case it is a large department store in South America that initiated and sustains facilities for obtaining something to read.

In North America other types of business have undertaken to get books and readers together. More than twenty years ago a factory in Tennessee tried out a new idea to help children grow up with a love for good books. An industrial plant in Gallatin (part of the Yale Lock and Hardware Division of the Yale and Towne Manufacturing Company) spent $10.00 to nail together a reading rack for children's books and another $200.00 to stock the rack with some six dozen titles selected from a list drawn up by the office of children's services of the New York Public Library. A sign placed above the rack stated:

> The books on this shelf are books that small children enjoy. Take one home with you to read to your children. They will have a good time and so will you. Bring it back when you and your children have finished it together so other families may enjoy it too.

Parent reaction showed that the experiment was a success. Many parents took books home, one after another. "We never had such nice books in our house before," said one woman employee." "We do more reading now," a man said. "I get as much of a kick out of this as the kids." (3)

Some bowling alleys in the United States now have collections of books which children can read while waiting for their parents who are bowling. Our doctor provides a number of children's books and magazines in his waiting room for his young patients. According to a recent newspaper article a supermarket in Alaska, known as the Christian Supermarket, provides a story-hour for children while mothers shop in the store.

It would seem that a shopping mall, of which we have so many today, might also make a contribution. In one of the malls near my home a variety of activities take place along the central walking

area. Youth groups at times hold bake sales to raise funds for some project. Puppet shows are given on other occasions. There have been exhibitions and demonstrations of many different types of hand crafts and other hobbies practiced in the area. One weekend there were many booths displaying a variety of antiques. Though I have not seen any I believe exhibitions of books could be helpful. There might be a display of old books showing the differences between those of today and earlier years. These could be books for adults and/or for children. There might also be exhibits of children's books from other countries. Such exhibits would be indicating that books are important to people just as are antiques, handcrafts and other hobbies.

Communities that have a real commitment to the improvement of reading also help by seeing that arrangements are made whereby children and youth needing such facilities have access to private, specialized libraries which organizations such as churches and synagogues maintain. Recently the son of a colleague was able to get information for a school report on Christianity, Islam and Judaism because he was given access to the library of the local synagogue.

In addition to making books available to children and youth through some of the ways just mentioned, some communities are helping in another important way, that is, by reading with children. Many children have no one at home who will listen to them read and talk with them about what they read, yet children like to have such opportunities. If these children are to have such opportunities, it will have to be done through the school. In some schools volunteers from the community are meeting this need, particularly for children who are slow in developing skills in reading. Sometimes the volunteers are

mothers who are not employed outside of the home and are able to arrange to come to the school at suitable hours each week. Other volunteers are retired persons who likewise can meet the school schedule, but in a few cases of which I know employed persons are also serving as volunteers. One large company in our area, the Pennsylvania Power and Light Company, allows its employees released time each week to go into the schools to work with children on a one-to-one basis. In some cases the work is in reading.

Usually a volunteer is assigned one child for the school year and often a close relationship develops between the child and his volunteer. One of my friends, a professor in another university, tells of a child, who on learning at the end of the year that he had been promoted, hastened to ask his volunteer whether she, too, had been promoted! The child did not wish to break the relationship, so wanted to be sure that both of them would go on to the next grade the following year. Dr. Robert Barth, who recently completed his doctorate at Lehigh University, is principal of a large elementary school which has made considerable use of volunteers. He collected evidence on what the relationship with the volunteer tutor means to a child. To him I am indebted for the following statements third-grade children made in response to the question: "Tell me one thing the volunteer did which you think helped you read better."

> She helped me with the words. When I got the word wrong she wrote it down on a piece of paper so I could study it and then I knew the word. Then I could use it in a story and I wouldn't miss the word."
>
> She helped me stop from bouncing when I read. Like when I read the period means stop, the comma means pause.

When asked "Tell me the one thing you liked most about working with your volunteer," one child responded:

> I liked to go over the story when she read it to me. Then I can make a book and she would help me draw the illustrations and we would check my vocabulary words. (1)

In concluding his keynote address at the annual reading conference at Lehigh University in 1966, the well-known writer, Louis Untermeyer, used the following quotation from an address given by Sir John Hershell in 1830 at the opening of a library at Eton, England:

> Give a man a taste for reading and the means of gratifying it, and you cannot fail to make him a happy, as well as a better man. You place him in contact with the best society and the best minds in every period of history, with the wisest and the wittiest, the tenderest and the bravest, those who have really adorned humanity. You make him a citizen of all nations and a contemporary of all ages. (7)

The late James E. Allen, a former U. S. Commissioner of Education, was one of many who would like all people to be able to enjoy the benefits of reading of which Hershell spoke. He believed that the Right to Read is as fundamental as the Right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Speaking before the annual convention of the National Association of State Boards of Education in Los Angeles in September, 1969, Allen proclaimed his crusade to assure that

> No one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire to read to the full limits of his capability.

Allen referred to this as "education's 'Moon" -- the target of the decade ahead."

The personnel of a school may be capable of doing a superior job in teaching reading and wish to do so, but may not have the materials or the time to do that kind of a job. In such cases the help of the community-at-large is needed. If children see

parental and community efforts to support athletics or other such activities they come to value them. Likewise they must see value being placed upon reading. Only then may we hope to realize Allen's goal, that is, that

> No one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire to read to the full limits of his capability.

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